



# SCHOOL SUCCESS: THE VOICE OF THE STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

Schools should guarantee that all students have the necessary conditions for an educational success, being the learning assessment the most determinant element. We present some results of a qualitative study, carried out in a Portuguese group of schools, with students in the third cycle of basic education, whose main objective is to understand their perspectives on the conditions that school offers to achieve success. A semi-structured interview was used to collect data. After ensuring that ethical questions were being respected, 18 students were interviewed. Data was analyzed using content analysis. The results highlight that the sense of belonging, the motivation, the interaction between students and teachers, as well as assessment tools and criteria are determinant elements for school success.

**KEYWORDS:** School, Regulation, Assessment, School Success.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Schools should guarantee, that all students have the necessary conditions for an educational success, being the learning assessment the most determinant element. This is a priority question in the agenda of politicians, schools and teachers. In Portugal, the government launched a School Success Promotion Program (2017) each school is due to planning, according to students' needs and the potential of the community. To integrate and motivate all students (Rodrigues, 2010), as well as to ensuring quality teaching, implies curricular contextualization, flexibility and formative assessment (Alves, 2004). However, school "continues to serve the same "curricular menu", to use the methodological utensils and the pedagogical action language that structured it as an institution destined to a public which tended to be homogenous and socially preselected" (Roldão 2000, p. 125). Assuming that school success is the norm, it's important to understand how students prospect the school and what conditions they consider to be successful. What dynamics are favored? What Kind of assessment? What expectations they have about teachers?

## 2. OBJECTIVES, CONTEXT AND SAMPLE:

A qualitative methodology was required, using interviews, with the following objectives: to know students' perceptions about the school; about teachers; on school conditions to achieve school success.

18 students participated in the 3rd cycle of primary education. Nine students had never repeated and nine had repeated once or more in a school year. Interviewees are between 13 and 16 years old. 55% are female and 45% are male.

### 2.1. Collection Data Instrument:

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, with prior authorization given by the caregivers, as they were under-age students; anonymity was ensured, assigning the code (S) to the student, followed by a number (from 1 to 18). The objectives were made explicit. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Content analysis (Bardin, 2009, p.40) made three categories stand out: students' perceptions about school; perceptions about teachers and activities carried out; and perceptions about assessment and success.

## 3. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS:

### 3.1. Perceptions about school

For the respondents, the school is a physical space with good facilities, recreation and green spaces: "we have space and we can socialize" (S9); "the school has many spaces for activities (S6; S9; S11); "the school has spaces with greenery and recycling bins" (S8).

All students consider that school is very good and recognize its importance: "it's a place where we learn, we have friends and we have a good social life" (S2).

However, some students reported: "there's not a lot of interaction between the school administration and students" (S3), and "teachers should improve the interaction between students and teachers outside the classroom" (S3; S5).

### 3.2. Perceptions about teachers and activities carried out:

Concerning students' perceptions about the teachers and the activities, they consider that there are good and bad teachers and the activities are diversified. Students positively or negatively mark the role of the teachers, as they play an important role in the students' motivation and in their success. Hence, a "good teacher knows how to explain and ... teaches well and asks if we have doubts or if we want them to explain again" (S2); "if I don't understand a part of the subject,

they help me or explain it again" (S8); because "they do everything to make us learn and get better grades" (S10).

Good teachers are concerned about results, they are dynamic and know how to motivate: "teachers insist on matters, make an effort for students to learn, and they support them" (S18); "sometimes a teacher in a discipline can capture more than one with the same subject" (S14).

On the other hand, a bad teacher "is severe and we lose the interest for the subject" (S3); "it's very boring, if it is only the teacher talking ... students should also take part" (S13); "they have no patience, they don't listen to us, they don't care about us, is always giving information, and only focuses on contents that's are the book" (S8).

Students consider the activities used by teachers influence the motivation for learning. Thus, teachers develop diverse activities, but the predominant is exposure: "in science, physics and chemistry we do experiments every Thursday, sometimes we use the computers in the classrooms, but in general it is more listening to the teacher than participating" (S1); "in mathematics we have the Kangaroo, in Portuguese made a book with poems, but teachers talk a lot". In the practical activities students feel more involved: "practical lessons are more dynamic, such as Science, Physics and Chemistry" (S3).

### 3.3. Students' perceptions on assessment and success:

In regard to students' perceptions, on assessment and success, the analysis brought out the assessment tools, assessment criteria and self-engagement.

The most widely used assessment tools are the tests. Students accept them, but consider that, they may decrease grades: "in languages, we would like to be evaluated orally, we are very valued in the writing and in other disciplines too" (S2) and tests could be substituted "by an individual or group work, I would be able to do better" (S17). Tests can penalize work and be punitive, because "I can't study for the tests."

Students stress the importance of homework: "homework is important, because it's a way to review what we did and check if we understood." (S5); "it helps, complements information that could be forgotten" (S6).

Other instruments are used by teachers: "the interaction that we have in class, exercises, individual work I did geography and technology" (S17); "group work..., it is good to interact with others" (S4).

Students report that the assessment criteria that teachers use are behavior, attitudes, participation in class, knowledge, commitment, skills: "teachers evaluate our performance" (S4); "they evaluate our knowledge and behavior" (S5); "attention in class" (S4); "concentration, the ability to work, participation, commitment, attendance, homework, organization and presentation of materials" (S8).

Some students feel unmotivated because, "only bad behavior is reflected in grades" (S9). In this sense, some of the students position themselves negatively about the fairness of the assessment, because teachers are not always correct in the evaluation, teachers restricting themselves to an Excel table: "teachers say that they are very necessary in grades and then they put them in an Excel table and are restricted by this" (S12).

Concerning the involvement in the assessment process, although students claim

to use, frequently, reflection and self-evaluation procedures, but these are still made, essentially at the end of each period, a time where students have to fill in the global self-assessment sheet, which will appear in their Individual Student Plan: "at the end of each period in all disciplines, I make a reflection so that teachers also have a sense of what we know and what we deserve"(S4); "I make my reflection and fill out a self-assessment sheet in all disciplines"(S5).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS:

We heard students, since this is the less heard voice in the drawing up and implementation of the curriculum. For the students, school is a place of knowledge, a place of collective accountability, an agent of socialization, which allows tightening bonds of friendship.

With regards to teachers, a good teacher is attentive and interactive with their students, transmits knowledge clearly, is dynamic, enjoys teaching and does not measure efforts to help students achieve good results. They can alter the taste for a subject, while a bad teacher cannot make a student like the discipline. Thus, the pedagogical practices contribute to a better or worse learning. In this respect, Day (2004, p.56) stresses that "teachers that are passionate about teaching feel well when they teach, the way children and young people feel good when they are taught by teachers passionate about teaching". On the other hand, a bad teacher has no patience with students, doesn't explain the subject, looks only into the manual, is not accessible, is too demanding and is unreasonable.

It should be noted, with other authors, the importance of teacher-student relations: "teachers with a passion for teaching strive to look behind the masks that each student has to be able to see things as they truly are. This is the basis for the construction of a teacher-student relationship that is authentic and to plan teaching in ways that can meet the interest and imagination of each student " (Day, 2004, p. 133).

The respondents were consensual in referring to the importance and the value of homework, individual and group work, exercises and reports. The most commonly used assessment tools and with greater weighting in the final grades (end of period and year) are written tests, translating teaching practices with excessive concern for results in the exams. Students accept written tests as something inevitable, rigorous and that requires them to study. However, the value of the tests must be done prudently, they may become a decreasing tool, not translating in improvement of results or more learning.

The clarification and disclosure of assessment criteria is essential, so that students have as a reference on their learning, because "the existence of an objective standard, criterion, or reference value, which can serve as a yardstick to assess the action (...) and guide the regulatory processes" (Sá, 2004, p.67) allows students to understand what is expected of them.

Processes of self-assessment make the involvement of students in the assessment, at the end of each period. However, in addition to the requirements that it puts, self-assessment allows to identifying and overcome the mistakes made, thus having a very important role in the promotion of the students' learning, in the development of autonomy and reflexivity, which lead to success.

The development of democratic practices in school and assessment are key, because "no one learns to listen and to understand if not first heard and understood" (Amado, 2007, p. 124).

Results cannot be generalized, but it can support further research with students of other levels of education, in order to get a greater understanding of relationship between assessment and school success.

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